

Proceedings of the New York State Communication Association

Volume 2010 *Proceedings of the 68th New York State
Communication Association*

Article 17

4-16-2012

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Recommended Citation

Louis, Maureen M. (2011) "The Empathy Description Exercise," *Proceedings of the New York State Communication Association*: Vol. 2010, Article 17.

Available at: <http://docs.rwu.edu/nyscaproceedings/vol2010/iss1/17>

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GIFT: The Empathy Description Exercise

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One of our main goals as teachers is to help our students become more empathetic in their communication. Students can often seem focused on self and the notion that their view is the only window to the world. This exercise is one step toward changing that perspective. The exercise sounds simple, but it isn't. Many students find the activity to be challenging, but in a supportive environment, it can help build humility, greater awareness of the needs of others, and improved communication skills.

Learning Objectives

- The student will gain understanding of the role of empathy in communication;
- The student will improve language awareness and vocabulary selection;
- The student will improve listening skills;
- The student will improve awareness of the needs and perspective of others;
- The student will develop patience and greater communication competence.

The Activity

The instructor briefly reviews four main ways to describe something:

1. Describe features and functions;
2. Analogize;
3. Compare to an opposite;
4. Demonstrate, show, or illustrate with a picture.

The students are then told that they must help another person understand or visualize something that the person has not seen or experienced before. The person they are helping (played by the instructor) is characterized as intelligent and interested, but unfamiliar with the item the student is to describe.

The items to be described are common things that we see and use on a regular basis. The idea is to select items that are so well known that they have become largely invisible to most people. For example, the instructor might ask a student to describe a frying pan, a swimming pool, a lawn, or the American flag. The students are told that they may use methods #1, #2, or #3, as shown above, but not #4 (that is, they may not show the item or use visual cues). So, using language alone, a student must help the listener understand or visualize the subject item.

The instructor must maintain the role of a person who has not experienced the item before. In this capacity, the instructor may ask questions as the description proceeds. This is where the describing student, particularly the first to participate, often exhibits frustration or embarrassment. When the student is asked to help the instructor understand or visualize such a nominally simple item, it is very easy for the student to slip into "everybody knows that" mode, thus demonstrating to the class the constant challenge to be empathetic communicators. The participating student also often discovers that they are not very good at describing the obvious. This can be unwelcome news, but is important insight that can motivate improvement.

Following the initial question, many students will simply begin listing features, without first identifying the broad category of the item. Also, many students are imprecise in their choice of words. For instance, using the word "round" to describe the three dimensional shape of a hamburger patty, when they really mean the word "disc." This can lead the listener to visualize the hamburger as a ball. The instructor should seek to work through the frustration by maintaining a positive tone and asking questions that reflect the cues that have been presented. (For example, when the student uses the word "round" to describe a hamburger, the instructor might ask, "So is a hamburger like a tennis ball?") This approach can lead to some fairly funny teaching moments and a positive outcome for the entire class. Keep in mind that the average first student participant requires 10 follow up questions to complete the exercise.

The instructor/facilitator both asks follow up questions as needed and can periodically stop the action to reflect on the communication process, how the student feels, how the student is making the listener feel, etc. Improved technique can also be taught at this time. By engaging in real time reflection and meta-communication, all participants have the opportunity to be active learners about the challenging concepts of perspective and empathy. The exercise can be repeated with 5-10 students. Technique will often clearly improve as later participants benefit from the earlier demonstrations of their peers.

Good communication requires precision in language, caring effort, and lack of presumption. It requires us to shift our focus from our own perspective to the perspective of others. The more we focus on self, the more we fail. This is our starting point as we help our students to be better, more considerate, more empathetic communicators.

A Variation in Method

Should the instructor prefer a broader pattern of participation, the full class can be shown an item. Each student can then take turns adding a sentence to the description until the entire group is satisfied that the item in question could be understood or visualized by a person who had never experienced it before.